

An EFL Theater Festival: After the Ball is Over

By Elliott Swift

So you're a little jaded from teaching the same classes year after year. Looking for something to spice up your life? How about producing an English language theater festival?

Although it is fun, it is a lot of work. I designed and produced two of them: the First Annual Bucharest Students of English Theater Festival and the First Annual Romanian Students of English Theater Festival. The first festival took place in Bucharest, Romania, during late May and early June of 1995, the second during the same time period the following year. The essential difference was that the latter festival included participants from all areas of Romania.

The following article is an amalgam of my experiences producing the festivals.

The idea for the initial festival came when Romanian teachers indicated that they would like to learn how to use theater to make their teaching of English more creative, enjoyable, and effective. As an EFL Fellow Teacher Trainer in Bucharest, my background in EFL teacher training and theater was invaluable in launching this project.

At the first meeting with a group of participating Bucharest primary, middle, and high school English teachers, I asked them to complete a needs analysis form. Based on the results, I developed two courses: Drama in the Classroom and American Theater. Drama in the Classroom focused on how theater games and techniques could be used to teach English; American Theater dealt with American dramatic literature (part of a Romanian English teacher certification module). Both courses also offered specific suggestions for teachers who wanted to engage their students more fully in the learning process (i.e., the learner-centered approach) and also provided information they would need in order to participate in the theater festival: the adaptation into playlet procedure and principles of stage direction and play production.

The Festival Format

After discussions with the teachers, it was decided that the festival would not be a competition in the usual sense (i.e., there would only be winners). The festival would be produced on the stage of the Sala Mica, a modern 200-seat theater in the National Children's Palace. It would be scheduled towards the end of the school year; on consecutive Sundays, with morning and afternoon sessions. To be fair to all participants, no teacher would be allowed to restage a play previously produced by a class.

Since we wanted every production to receive an appropriate award, we invented award categories corresponding to each entrant's production. The two basic categories were musicals

and non-musicals. To qualify as a musical, the production had to include at least six musical numbers, each of which could be either a song, a dance, or a combination of the two. The songs and dances could be accompanied by either live or recorded music.

Among the award categories were Best Adaptation of a Novel, Best Adaptation of a Movie Musical, Best Adaptation of an Adventure Drama, and Most Original Adaptation of an American Classic Play.

We also included awards for Best Production in each grade category: primary, middle, and high school. The jury, composed of a Romanian English teacher, a Fulbrighter or Peace Corps Volunteer, and me, voted on which entrants would receive these awards.

The Goals and Objectives

The teachers felt that the primary objective of the festival should be to maximize the students' creative involvement, both linguistically and artistically. So when the question arose as to what kind of play should be presented, students rejected the option of producing published plays, which they believed would put too much emphasis on memorization. Writing an original play was a possibility, but because most of the students and teachers had no play writing experience, that idea was dropped.

Since one of the other goals of the festival was helping the students learn more about American culture, it was felt that the best way to do that and learn about play writing at the same time would be to have the students adapt American short stories, poems, plays, and novels into short plays or playlets. I had a number of short story anthologies, plays, and other types of American literature, which USIS had ordered for teacher trainers. Middle and high school English teachers selected works from among these that they thought would be of interest and appropriate for their students. Since I did not have any material appropriate for primary school students, the primary school teachers suggested that their students adapt fairy tales and fables from world literature, which everyone thought was a good idea.

To allow for maximum participation, it was agreed that the length of the playlets should be from 10 to 15 minutes for the primary schools, from 15 to 20 minutes for the middle schools (later increased to 25 minutes), and from 30 to 40 minutes for the high schools. Each production group was given five minutes to arrange their set and five minutes to remove it from the stage after their performance.

Technical and Dress Rehearsals

Although there was no way to regulate how much time a teacher could devote to rehearsing a playlet, each production was given equal time to rehearse on the Sala Mica stage. Each production had one technical rehearsal with whatever sound and lighting they decided to employ and one dress rehearsal; the rehearsals were scheduled on the two days immediately preceding the Sunday performances. With just a few exceptions, the lighting amounted to three lighting

levels: bright, dim, and blackout. The recorded music that each group used varied from a large number of songs/instrumental pieces (some live and most recorded) to very few. In virtually all cases, the sets were minimal.

The final rehearsals were creative cauldrons of activity, most of it on the stage. Notes about the script, pronunciation, usage, staging, projection, and acting were given to the students and teachers, who enthusiastically incorporated the suggestions for improvement into the work.

Since each playlet was supposed to be a certain length, plays that ran over the time limit either had to be speeded up or cuts had to be made. Sometimes this involved eliminating a section of the playlet that affected certain students, but difficult as this was, the rules had to be followed more or less.

The technical rehearsals were the most demanding aspect of the festival-and caused the most anguish because they required the assistance of the National Children's Palace professional lighting and sound technicians, each of whom was assisted by a student from each school specially chosen for that role. Since the technicians couldn't be expected to learn the light and sound cues for each of the 19 playlets, their student assistants were, in a sense, responsible for "calling the cues": telling the technicians when the lights and the recorded music were to be turned on and off.

Even though the teacher/directors were encouraged to keep the sound and lighting simple, the pressure on the technicians to perform light and sound cues for nine or ten productions a day was enormous. (The rehearsals ran from 8:30am to 4 or 5pm on some days.)

The Performances/the First Festival

As you would expect, the productions varied from average to excellent. Some of the high points included a primary school performance of *Cinderella*, in which the Prince played the electric piano and sang "Cinderella, beautiful girl." using the tune of "Silent Night" to an adoring Cinderella, and a performance of *Catcher in the Rye*, which ended with the young actor who portrayed Holden playing the guitar and singing "Imagine" by John Lennon.

The response by the audience was enthusiastic, and the awards ceremonies (after the end of each Sunday's performances), in which all the participants, and their friends and families took part, was extremely boisterous.

After the last performance on the first Sunday, a famous Romanian actor (who was given a small stipend), handed out the awards and prizes to the primary and middle school teachers and students (and was deluged with requests by the students for autographs). At the conclusion of the second Sunday's performances, awards and prizes were distributed to the high school students and teachers; virtually the same types of awards and prizes were given to the primary and middle school students and teachers.

The awards and prizes (supplied by USIS) included maps and charts for the schools, award certificates, letters of appreciation, books and magazines (USIA's *American Theater*, *American Music*, and *American Dance*) for the teachers, and movie posters, magazines (*Fast Times*), and maps for the students. After each award was announced, the audience went crazy, cheering and hooting like, well, like STUDENTS!

Aftermath

Everyone who participated in the festivals (at least to my knowledge) believed the English Students' Theater Festival concept will spread to other countries in Eastern and Central Europe.

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